



(what's in store) for my heart by
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Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Humor, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Dustin H., Eleven/Jane H., Mike W.

Pairings: Mike W./Eleven/Jane H.

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-12-02 16:07:26

Updated: 2018-12-02 16:07:26

Packaged: 2019-12-12 23:14:15

Rating: T

Chapters: 1

Words: 7,191

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: (Standalone oneshot.) Meet-cute AU: He's stacking shelves the first time he sees her — the cute girl with the curly hair and a love of Eggo waffles. A week later, she becomes the sole owner of Mike Wheeler's whole heart. Then all it takes is an embarrassing run-in and a Christmas song, and suddenly they're soulmates.

(what's in store) for my heart

He's stacking shelves the first time he sees her.

Hands kind of sticky from cleaning up a spilled jar of pickled onions, the sighs of an elderly woman down the aisle catch his attention. She's pushing up on the toes of her boots, an alabaster hand trying and failing to reach the canned beans on the top shelf—the expensive brand with the fancy label and the swirly font practically taunting her.

Mike smooths his hands down the front of his cotton apron, shoulders slumping as he makes to step off of the ladder. He gets halfway down before he sees *her*.

A few feet away, there's a girl now talking to the elderly woman. Her back is turned to Mike so he can't see her face, but he watches as she gestures about, earning a grin from the pensioner as the sweetest of giggles—from the girl, not the old woman—fills the air.

Perching forward, Mike rests an arm against the top step of the ladder, crinkled shirt sleeve rolling up. He watches in curiosity as the girl—the young *woman*, he'd later learn—then places her own basket down at her feet and stretches up on her tiptoes to retrieve the beans.

She has to be about a foot or so shorter than Mike (at the very least), so naturally, he doesn't assume she can reach the item herself. But then she reaches and *reaches*, and somehow she manages to flip the can closer to the edge of the shelf with just the tip of her fingernail. The can rolls towards her as if on command, and she catches it with such *finesse* that Mike can all but stand there in awe.

Handing over the beans to the lady, she places a friendly hand on her shoulder in reply to the '*thank you, dear*', and then she's spinning spun around to carry on with her own shopping.

Officially distracted and daydreaming on the job, Mike is pretty sure his breath actually *hitches* deep in his throat when he finally gets a look at her.

She wears her hair down, soft curls delicately grazing her shoulders, and her shoes squeak on the freshly moped tiles as she turns to face him. Her jeans have holes in the knees, the kinds of tears that made Mike think she's taken a pair of scissors to them herself rather than just buy them that way. Her sweater hangs loosely from her frame as though it's two sizes too big for her, either a hand-me-down or a bad purchase—but it *fits* her.

And her face... Okay, so he's not a total cheeseball but *wow*.

Hazel eyes, wide and full of life were... *staring back up at him*, and Mike mentally cringes for looking like a total creep. He licks his lips, ducks his head almost bashfully when she takes two steps forward.

She clears her throat, waiting until she's only about a foot away from him before her lips part and she asks her question, "Excuse me?"

(Mike is *done* for.)

(She's totally gonna report him for staring or something.) "Yes?" Mike blinks, daring a look across at her.

Deciding that it's probably best to just play it cool, he tries for a polite smile, hopping off of the ladder. He reaches down to rip into the last unopened box of dry ramen packets on the floor to keep himself busy and pretend—with the *last* shred of dignity he still has left—that he wasn't gawking at her like some weirdo. The packaging tape creaks as he pulls it loose, knuckles practically white from exerting his strength.

(Really, he could have just cut it open but in the back of his mind he'd probably just switched *Show Her You're Macho* mode on. Damn masculine pride.)

"Do you," and she lowers her gaze to the ground as a strand of hair gets tucked behind her ear, "sell Eggos here?" Her fingers run along her earlobe, nails scratching at the skin almost nervously for a moment.

Mike stands up straighter to really pay attention to her then, forcing himself to ignore the fact that her voice is quite possibly just the

sweetest thing he's ever heard (honestly, it's like cotton candy laced with honey.) She's still staring at him, swaying from side to side on the heels of her shoes as she waits for an answer. Glancing down, Mike takes note of the two Golden Delicious apples and the single pack of Reese's Pieces in her basket. His brows furrow, "Like... the waffles?"

"Exactly like the waffles," she says, and her hands tighten around the black handle of her basket. Her eyebrows furrow and her nose crinkles as a smile works its way onto her face. Her bottom lip slides between her teeth, and she bites it for a second before looking up at the employee. "The frozen ones?"

"Umm," he stills, eyes narrowing in on her face in consideration. He drops the handful of noodle packets back into the box, and his hands slide into the front pockets of his jeans, the green apron hanging down his front bunching up around his thighs, "I think so," Mike says, and he pauses for a moment to nip at the plump skin of his bottom lip.

(*Show her, you idiot.*)

"Maybe down the freezer aisle," Mike suggests before he means to, lips parting as his own eyes widen in surprise at his choice of words. He blinks then, watching as she nods, dropping his gaze entirely.

(*Shit.*)

The girl simply brushes fallen hair behind her left ear (again, as though it's a tic), head tilting. He notices her hand tightening around the basket handle, the bracelet around her wrist sliding down to her palm, "Can you show me?"

She smiles over at him, almost shyly—Mike could *swear* it—and then she's raising her eyebrows and *waiting*.

"Umm," Mike swallows a breath, brushing a hand through his hair as the other remains in his pocket, "Yeah!" The young man clears his throat and then, "I mean, yeah. I can take you... *show* you." He offers, nodding.

The girl doesn't budge or move to follow after him until Mike has kicked the noodle box out of the way, the cardboard slotting in perfectly between the legs of the ladders.

Following after him in silence, she remains a few steps behind — hands clutching the plastic carrier as though her life depends on it, plump lips pulled thin until Mike speaks again, a hand waving about in show.

"Frozen waffles," he says, a smile slowly gracing his features at the sight of her face lighting up. Noticing her reach for the freezer handle, Mike swiftly pulls it open for her before she can even touch it, and he politely waits for her to grab two boxes of Eggos from the shelf: Homestyle and insipid and boring.

She swaps the basket from her right arm to her left, pulling it up to the crook of her elbow with a slight huff, "Thanks," she says, squinting as she leans closer to read the name written on his tag, "Mike."

(She *did* just start blushing, right? He didn't totally imagine that? Like, her cheeks are definitely *pinker* right now? Holy shit.)

"Just doing my job," he shrugs, feigning nonchalance and pretending he isn't already *smitten* with this stranger in front of him (really, she could call his name and step on his neck in the same breath and he wouldn't mind—not one bit.)

"Right," she nods refusing to drop his gaze.

Mike raises one shoulder, moving his hand around animatedly, "Do... do you have a name?" He licks his lips, bites his bottom one as he waits for her response.

"Do you ask every customer their name?" She quips, a single brow crooking in amusement.

(Just go for it, Wheeler.)

Mike grins, bashfully, "Just the pretty ones," he tells her as his arms slide over his chest until he can tuck his hands beneath his pits (and, yeah, he's *definitely* sweating now.)

"Oh," her lips part in surprise, hazel eyes bulging at the intended compliment, "And I'm..."

Mike gulps, "Pretty," he says, soft and slow, "Yeah, I think you are." (This is getting progressively worse by the second, Wheeler.) (Abort, abort, *abort*, goddamnit!)

She smirks at that, blinking as her eyes lower to the floor, "Thank you," she mumbles, suddenly entranced by the black and white stripes of Mike's socks showing over his shoes. "I'm Jane Eleanor."

"It's nice to meet you, Jane Eleanor."

The girl—whose *adorable* name Mike just so happens to now be totally *in love with*—hums, and she smiles up at him a final time, "You, too, Mike."

And then she's walking off, not even throwing him a second glance look over her shoulder. And she's turning the corner and disappearing from view and he's just left standing there like a total loser.

(Way to go, Wheeler.)

That's not the last time he sees her though.

A week later, he's running the checkout desk closest to the exit because the first one is broken and his co-worker is in the back running inventory.

There's a snowstorm due any minute; it'd been announced on the news some four hours ago, and Mike has been rubbing his hands up and down his arms to try and find some warmth ever since—every time the front doors fly open and someone trails the cold in with them.

Apparently, they can't close for the day because people need stuff for the incoming blizzard and his boss is a *total* money-grabbing asshat. But his manager went home early, and most of everyone else either called in sick or bailed almost as soon as they arrived. So it was just Mike minding the store while Dustin (his dopey, dope-carrying, slacker work friend) kept himself busy in the storeroom (though

Mike's fairly certain he's just lighting up.)

It's time like these when he regrets not starting a family at eighteen years. If he had a kid, he could probably just get off work and head home but- Yeah, *no*.

Spinning around full-circle on his seat for the fifth time in a row, Mike rests his elbows against the cool checkout desk as his back arches over it, feet pressing up against the side panel to keep his balance. The top of the unit is icy to the touch, right in the line of *fire* of the store entrance and its drafts.

The parking lot is mostly clear now, aside from a couple of cars and a motorbike hastily pulled up in front of the store window. Mike doesn't know who it belongs to but if he had to guess, he'd bet it was Dustin's.

They don't know each other that well, in all honesty. They'd just bonded over a love of nerd shit and a mutual distaste for this line of work. But money's money and a job is a job, and so if Mike has to spend cool (*uncool*) weekends in December managing a small hipster grocery store because his boss is a tool, then you can bet he's gonna make nice with his co-workers.

And Dustin's an alright guy. Sure, the smell of pot is a little off-putting but Mike isn't a total saint either. And the guy's got mad poker skills so at least they've got something to do when the store's completely dead or they're on break. The only problem with Dustin's gambling is that Mike now owes him twenty bucks and one pretty ridiculous dare.

"Cute girl, two o'clock."

There's a murmur behind him then, and Mike glances over his shoulder to see said-friend peering over the top of a magazine. Dustin spreads the pages—of what looks like a preteen girl's magazine—wide open to shield his face from view. He wiggles a single eyebrow and shoots the taller guy a knowing look, "*dude!*"

With a scowl and growing annoyance, Mike spins back around in his seat to get a look at what (or rather who) Dustin is talking about. It

takes him all of approximately two seconds to see *her*.

She's down by the end of the third aisle, fingers rhythmically tapping against her lips as she scans the assortment of cereal boxes, head tilting to the side in consideration.

She's got a puffy, padded pink coat pulled over the sweater she wore last week. Her skirt reaches just above her knees, and she has thick, black wooly tights pulled up beneath it to shield her skin from the cold. But she's still wearing Converse and Mike has to smile at that.

"Is that the chick?"

(Sometimes, Mike regrets telling him *anything*.)

Mike swallows a breath, quickly shifting his gaze from off of the brunette, "No."

Dustin snorts, keeping the magazine over his face as he scoots over to Mike on his own swivel chair, "Yeah, it is. You're, like, salivating." He reaches his hand out to swipe a finger across Mike's chin, a chuckle in tow.

The black-haired boy swats his hand away, pulling a face, "Shut up," he shrugs him off, moving a hand up to scratch at the base of his neck, "It's not her."

"Well, the only other people that come in here are either *blatantly* gay men, old people, or so-old-they-might-as-well-be-dead people so..." Dustin argues, throwing up a hand in defeat as the other flaps the magazine around like a fan, "I'm just saying."

"I'm never telling you anything... *ever*," Mike shakes his head, "I swear."

Dustin lowers the paper then, smirk in full-swing on his face. His cheeks puff out and his dimples cave in, "Whatever you say, Romeo."

"Hi."

(Shit.)

She's stood right in front of him now, basket on top of the desk and hands clutching the handle. There's a soft smile on her face, one that suggests she might have *actually*

overheard them. And from the way she's glancing back and forth between the two men, Mike's pretty sure she did.

(Double shit.)

"Hey," he rasps, voice rough from his throat drying at the sight of her (maybe he *had* been drooling), "You're back."

The brunette simply stares at him, all doe-eyed and sheer *cuteness*, "Well, I needed stuff so-

"Yeah, Michael," Dustin starts, slowly raising the magazine up to his face again as he jokes, "She had needs."

"Do you," Mike starts, clearing his throat. "Do you eat *anything* else?"

The girl raises a hand from the basket then, crumpled-up five dollar bill clenched in her fist. Her eyebrows furrow and she shoots him a confused look, "Sorry?"

(Not a great start, admittedly.)

Coughing, Dustin mumbles, "Yeah, dick." He kicks the back of Mike's chair then, sending the taller man forward into the desk.

"The fuck-" Mike blinks, glaring over his shoulder at his friend, and he can practically *feel* his throat tighten up again. He whips back around to Jane Eleanor, "I just, umm," he runs his tongue over his lips, stalling for a moment. She's just staring at him, all curious and sweet and *perfect*, and he's- He's a total goner. "It's just... you always buy Eggos, is all."

"Because they taste good," she explains politely, and he can see her ears move up behind her hair as she smiles, "Don't *you* have a favorite food?"

Mike shrugs, "No," he rubs the back of his hand over his forehead, shooting Dustin a pleading look she won't see, "Dustin? Do you?" He

asks through gritted teeth.

Dropping the magazine on top of the cashier with a gentle 'plop', Dustin smirks, "I have inventory to check, is what I have." He pats Mike on the back amicably, "Good luck."

"Yeah, thanks." Mike rolls his eyes as his friend runs off, practically skidding down the vegetable aisle, "Ass."

He picks up the first box of Eggos from her basket then, turning them over in his hand to find the barcode.

Jane Eleanor blinks, sucking in a breath before asking, "Why did he wish you luck?" "Huh?"

"Your friend," she points a finger down the aisle, "What do you need luck for?" (Either she's onto him or she's just extremely nosy.)

(Knowing his luck, it's probably the former.)

"Oh," he scans the box quickly then, reaching for the second with his free hand, "Well, my shift is ending soon so he probably just meant, you know... good luck... getting home."

She just nods, seemingly accepting this as an explanation.

There's an awkward silence while he rings her up, but after she's paid (and just before she heads out into the oncoming snowstorm), she leans up over the desk and reaches for Mike's face.

He's at a loss for a total of maybe three seconds, right up until he sees the small off- green leaf hanging from her fingertips, pulled straight from his disheveled curls. It must have blown in with the wind and nestled into Mike's hair sometime ago.

"There," she drops the leaf onto the cash register, grinning with a *definite* blush, "Now you look even cuter, Mike."

And then she's out the door with two full boxes of Eggo waffles and Mike Wheeler's whole entire heart.

"You owe me this, Michael Henry Wheeler."

He really hates Dustin sometimes.

Ever since Mike dropped his wallet a couple of days ago and his friend had had the decency to pick it up for him—after scanning through his cards and pocketing a five dollar bill, obviously—the curlier-haired guy hadn't once not used his whole name.

(He really hates being a klutz sometimes. If his legs weren't so long, he wouldn't stumble so much. And if he didn't stumble half as much, he wouldn't-)

"Can't I just owe you fifteen bucks and we call it even?" Mike slips his hands into his front pockets, stretching out the material with clenched fists. He scrapes his teeth over his bottom lip, eyeing the storefront almost anxiously.

There's an old man stood out front, a paper bag full of what Mike can only assume are prescription drugs swinging from his left hand. He's scanning the parking lot, pulling the cap further over his face as he looks out into the open space, clearly waiting for someone.

(This place is definitely just full of old people and Mike has to... do *that*.)

Dustin just shakes his head, tutting, "A dare is a dare, Michael Henry Wheeler," he says. He pulls a pair of woolen mittens from his coat pocket then, leaning back against the passenger side door of Mike's car to slip them on. "But I tell you what," he pulls one glove down, glancing up at Mike with a sheepish look on his face as he kicks a leg back and rests his foot against the wheel trim, "You do this and I'll let you off with the money."

Rolling his eyes, Mike simply shrugs, "Gee, thanks." He fists the car keys in his right pocket, letting out a loaded breath, "I hate you." He flicks black curls from his face, snow crunching beneath his boots as he spins to face the drugstore, yanking the beanie out of his back pocket.

(This is such bullshit.)

Mike pulls the beanie down to his eyebrows as Dustin just laughs, straightening up against the door with a shit-eating grin on his face. He cups now glove-clad hands around his mouth, echoing out a "The *biggest*, Michael Henry Wheeler!"

The taller man flips him off then, a lengthy arm flying out behind him to throw his middle finger up. He grumbles something beneath his breath, incoherent even to him. Shoving his hands back in his jean pockets, Mike trudges onward.

The pharmacy's illuminated sign is glowing, the neon green color almost blinding in the darkening sky: Byers Pharmacy. It's quite late in December, the ground's covered in a fresh glaze of snow, and Mike would rather be anywhere else.

(He could be at home right now, drinking his sorrows away or going to bed early and pretending tomorrow *isn't* Christmas Day.)

(Or he could be playing PlayStation, pretending his new neighbor upstairs isn't a *ridiculously* loud singer... who's also tone deaf as hell. He's never even met them, and he already knows he doesn't want to.)

(And... whatever. His shift ended, like, an hour ago. It's *bullshit*.)

Walking through the entrance and feeling a sudden wave of heat wash over him— probably due to the store's heating being turned up to the max—Mike unzips the front of his jacket. He pulls up the sleeves on his hoodie underneath, feet shuffling along the floor as he makes his way toward the back aisle.

Dustin said they'd be down at the back of the store, wedged in between the overpriced sanitary products and the Pampers (and whoever laid out the store obviously thought they were being clever.)

He doesn't need tampons, and he's fairly certain he doesn't need feminine wipes, so Kike just heads straight for the middle of the aisle.

There's an array of colourful boxes laid out in front of him, hanging and taunting and suddenly he's being transported back to his high school days—back when he had bad posture and one chaste kiss under his belt and *no game whatsoever* (and to be honest, he's still not

even sure if he has game now.)

(He doesn't exactly have an exhaustive list of girls he's dated but... Twenty-something Mike Wheeler isn't a total boy scout either.)

(That doesn't make this any less embarrassing though.)

Reaching forward to just grab the box he *knows* he has to, Mike picks up two boxes (for good measure). It's green, unnecessarily larger than the others, and he's pretty sure he's gonna die of humiliation when he pays for these because there's a blatantly *big* guy working the desk and he's definitely gonna be sizing Mike up.)

(Seriously, the guy's bald and tatted up and he could probably knock Mike's lanky ass out in two seconds flat.)

Taking a second, he considers the other options, paying close attention to the big blue box—its contents supposedly licorice flavored. He reads the slogan of the red box over and over again, "*Finger fuckin' good*," (he's pretty sure they could get sued for that one), before stifling a laugh.

"Excuse me?" A soft voice asks from behind him.

(He totally read that out loud, didn't he?)

Looking back, Mike's breath catches in his throat as he spots the girl, rifling through her purse with a pair of deer antlers on a headband hanging from her arm.

Mike's lips part as if he's going to speak some more, to say something to her. But before he can, he's tripping over an unnoticed basket someone conveniently left in the middle of the aisle, and he's falling *right* into her—head into side and arms around her waist to drag her down with him.

(Way to go, dipshit.)

Her purse goes flying with her, its content spilling out onto the floor. Mike quickly moves into a kneeling position to help her reorganize her bag, collecting all of the items around them (and he tries not to be *too* nosy but she has a Jurassic Park keychain and a pack of Tic

Tac fresh mints in her bag... and he's in *love*.)

(He's definitely not *in love* with her. That, well... that would just be stupid.)

She's just so... pretty, and she seems nice enough; always smiling and politely thanking whoever is working in the store that day. And sure, he's only had *two* conversations with her so for all he knows she could actually be a total mouthbreather... but he really, sincerely doubts it.

(And it's not because she may very well be the most beautiful woman—hell, *person*—he's ever seen. It's *not*, he swears it.)

(And it is *not* because she called him cute last week. It's... well, okay, maybe that had played a part in Mike's growing fondness for the girl.)

"I'm so sorry!" Mike exclaims, reaching a hand out to help the girl up. He waits for her to grab his hand before he pulls her upright (and he won't lie—he's *sure* he felt a spark shoot straight up his arm and into his chest, like, as soon as they touched.) Once she's up, she's reaching down to pick up her dropped purse,

The brunette stops wiping her hands down her sides, daring a look up at him, "It's fine," she says, words slurring from her mouth as she takes him in. Recognition dawns on the young woman's face then and she can't help but smile, "Mike."

"Jane," he whispers, quieter than he wanted to. So he clears his throat, rubs his free hand over his chin, "Eleanor. Jane Eleanor." His eyes narrow in on the name-tag pinned to her sweater, just passed the flap of her coat. *Byers Pharmacy*.

She shrugs, "Jane is fine." Mike's eyebrows furrow, "El?" "El?"

"Yeah, you know because of it's like the French word for 'her', and I... I keep running into you, and you're a girl, so—"

She blinks, beaming with a toothy smile, "I like it."

"Okay," a beat then, "You work here?"

"Every Saturday. My shift just ended," she explains, "Crap." (Every *Saturday*? So... Dustin.)

Suddenly, she's kneeling down on the floor, right by Mike's left boot. Reaching forward and past his foot, she picks up a small piece of what looks to be metal—silver—and then she's standing again.

That's... a ring. A very expensive, fancy ring.

(An engagement ring, Mike notes, eyeing the small diamonds encrusted into the shiny band.)

"Is that—"

El looks up, batting her lashes almost obliviously, "Hmm?" She pulls a small velvet box from her handbag then, flicking it open to slot the ring back inside after dusting it off.

"Umm," Mike starts, mud brown eyes blinking as his attention drops to the ring box in her hands (and he could probably pinpoint the *exact* hex code color of his cheeks right now), "Congratulations?"

(It's a ring, Mike. You know what that means.) (Either she's proposing, or she's been proposed to.)

(She's probably marrying someone else, so you're just totally, desperately, *foolishly* falling for this totally, definitely, *very* unattainable dream girl.)

"It's my dad's.

(Not that you ever had a chance, Michael Henry Wheeler. She's... and you're... Well, you know.)

(Wait... *what*?)

"Huh?" Mike blinks, at a loss.

El—and he's really in love with her new nickname now—smiles, ducking her gaze and pursing her lips for a moment. She pulls the box open again, clutching it in her palm as she raises it up to his face, "It's for my dad... and his girlfriend. My stepmom." She wiggles her

shoulders, thin brows raising matter-of-factly as she snaps it closed in his face, "you *know*."

"And you're buying..." El looks down to his hands, brows knitting as she reads the big, bold letters printed over the front of the boxes: TROJAN MAGNUM (now vegan-friendly!). "Wrap it before you slap it," she recites the slogan, corners of her mouth shamelessly curling up as her eyes drift from the box to Mike's face.

Mike feels the color drain from his cheeks and he's pretty sure he's gonna pass out.

(Great.)

"They're not mine," he shakes his head after a beat or two, stammering, "I mean, they aren't *not* mine but... Well, I mean I'm buying them for me but they're not *for* me, you know what I mean? So, technically they're mine, but... I'm not gonna use them because I don't need them. Not-not because I don't use condoms, but- Well, I do when I *need* to but that's not often and I don't really need condoms right now. And even if I did, they wouldn't be so- You know, just regular- They're not for me but they're mine for... Feel free to interrupt me."

"Your girlfriend," she quirks a brow, tongue creeping out to moisten her lips with a slight smile, "or boyfriend?"

"Oh, I'm not..." he swallows, cheeks reddening at the mention of his love life, "I'm single," He rasps, shoulders rising and falling in a shrug, "for reference."

El blinks, nose scrunching adorably, "For *what*?"

"Shit, no. Not for reference, not like 'in case', you know. Just... yeah, never mind. Just forget I said... that." He closes his eyes, throwing his head back with a strained groan, "Forget I said anything."

"So you're just," and she nods down to the twin pack of condoms in his hands, "buying those for *fun*?"

"It's a dare," he tells her honestly, Adam's apple bobbing as his throat tightens, suffocating him. He pulls on the lapels of his shirt, jaw

widening as his lips part to allow oxygen to enter his lungs. "My, uh... my friend from work,"

She clicks her tongue, humming, "The one who suspiciously smells of pot?" (So obviously she hasn't clocked that Dustin set him up yet.)

"One and the same," Mike grins, and he swaps the boxes from one hand to the other, "He didn't think I'd have the balls to buy them."

The brunette giggles at that, arms folding over her chest to accentuate the bedazzled reindeer on her sweater, its antlers hidden behind the flaps of her puffy coat, "I see."

"Yeah," Mike nods, gazing off behind her to gather himself, "Do you... what are you doing

now?"

(Because it's Christmas Eve and, while Mike's night consists of reheated pizza and an hour-long game of Marvel's Spiderman via the magic of the internet and his PS4, he's pretty sure she has better plans than him.)

(Mainly, because she looks cute and he can't imagine she's just going to let *that* perfectly corny sweater go to waste.)

"I'm on my way home. I've just gotta pick some things up for my dad first," she tells him finally, pushing her hair behind her ears. She twirls a single strand around her index finger, eyeing the young man with honeyed wide eyes, "you know, for tonight."

"Sure," he nods, meeting her gaze again, "so he's... proposing?"

"With a ring, you'd think so," she grins.

"Right," Mike sucks in his bottom lip, running his fingers along his mouth, anxiously tapping the rose skin there, "Well, I guess I better go pay for these..."

(Or you could ask her-)

"Right, yeah," El says, "you don't wanna disappoint your friend." El

smiles in bemusement, "Mike?"

His brows raise up to the bottom of his grey beanie then, furrowing in curiosity and partial glee, "Yeah?" He blinks, once then twice.

She shrugs (and he's not ignorant to the wicked look on her face), "Don't forget to wrap it before you slap it."

"I'm gonna kill you,"

Dustin snickers, sliding off of the hood, "Guess you found out, huh?" He snags the paper bag from Mike's hands then, peering inside with a smirk, "Shit, you didn't give her a box?"

"Can we not?" Mike grumbles, and he steals the bag from his friend with a scowl. He quickly pulls the keys from his pocket and unlocks the car, tossing the paper bag into the backseat. "How did you even know she works here?"

"Michael, where do you think I get my *prescription* pot from?" He waggles his brows, tears one of his gloves off with his teeth, "Huh?"

"I *hate* you."

"No, you don't." Dustin argues, and he slaps both hands on the roof of the car, thumping down on it with a triumphant look in his eye, "Because now your little lady friend knows what to expect."

Mike just pulls a face, yanking his door open with force, "There's something very wrong with you." He points a finger in Dustin's face, stretching over the roof.

But Dustin just grabs his hand and leans closer to whisper (but not really *whisper*), "I'm not the one who just bought massive rubbers in front of their crush."

"She's not my *crush*."

"Sorry," Dustin wags his tongue with a roll of his eyes, "The love of your life?"

"A girl."

Plastering a hand over his chest, Dustin gasps, "A *woman*, excuse you," he shakes his head, "that you didn't ask out."

"She has plans. And, besides, it's Christmas tomorrow." He explains reasons, sliding into the driver's seat and turning on the ignition, waiting for Dustin to hop in.

He turns the heater on, turns to his friend as the passenger side door shuts, "Nobody dates on Christmas Day."

"Dude, you're gonna be cooped up in your apartment all day!" Dustin sniffles, nose scrunching from the change in temperature as heat blares through the vents. He holds his hands up to the dashboard, palms flat against the warming surface, "You could have at least *asked*."

"I'm going to my sister's place for lunch, what are you talking about?" Mike counters, leaning back against the seat. He raises a brow smugly, "Beats you and your cat."

"Me and my pussycat are gonna have a pretty *lit* day, I'll have you know," Dustin says, "Meanwhile, you won't have any pus-"

"Do *not* finish that sentence," Mike warns him with a glare out of the corner of his eye.

Dustin finishes through gritted teeth as though he'd never been cut off, "...to keep you company."

The black haired boy starts up the engine then, stretching out his fingers before pulling on his seatbelt, "I hate you."

"Love you, too, Michael Henry Wheeler."

When he finally gets home on Sunday, he's exhausted. As in he spent six hours conversing with family members he doesn't like and playing with toddlers who only acknowledge wifi-enabled toys, and he's absolutely fucking drained of all energy.

Granted, Nancy—his dear big sister with the heart of gold and a tendency to host big *holiday* parties—had pulled out all the stops this year. The food was great, the wine was amazing, but Mike had just been... otherwise preoccupied.

With no interest in talking to his investment-banker cousin and not a fan of dancing with his elderly aunts, Mike had simply ducked out. He'd bid his sisters farewell, wished them and their respective partners the best for the new year, and then he'd got the hell out of dodge and drove home with the radio blasting.

Because, despite how hard he tried, the only thing—only person—he actually wanted to talk to, to think about, was out of reach and completely inaccessible.

He'd really placed her up on a pedestal, having never once actually sought her out of his own volition. And now he was longing, missing someone he didn't even really know.

"I turned my face away and dreamed about you!"

The yelling is coming from the hall outside, and it's getting louder in volume as the singer nears Mike's front door.

(Goddamn neighbor from hell.)

(He really doesn't need *this* right now.)

(He just wants to sit in silence, pity himself for being a loser, and eat some dried -up yule log stole when nobody was looking.)

"I've got a feeling this year's for me and you!" The voice just outside his door continues on, followed by a loud thumping against what Mike knows to be the staircase. Either the girl is drunk or she's just naturally *that* loud.

Truthfully, he's hoping it's the former. But then... she does this all the time, and it's always *bad*, and-

"We kissed on the corner then danced through the night!"

Pulling open his front door to *finally* face the latest nuisance in his

life, Mike's jaw nearly drops to the floor.

(What the *actual* fuck?)

"Mike?"

(It's *fate*.)

(It has to be **fate**.)

There, right in front of him, is the girl that's been filing his thoughts for the past few weeks. She'd got a crushed black velvet dress on, a green jacket is thrown over her shoulder, and that headband with the antlers is actually *on* her head now, the glitter sparkling in her curls.

(God, she's *perfect*.) (Well...)

El pulls a bud from her ear, eyes wide as she takes in the man before her. She gasps in surprise, moving to take out the second earbud as Mike just stands there—half in shock, half in adoration.

(She can't sing for shit but... okay, *whoa*.)

(Neighbor from *heaven*.)

"Hi."

With a smile, the brunette just approaches him with small steps, almost cautious, "Hey," "*You're* the tone d- You live-" Mike corrects himself, not wanting to insult her.

Nodding, El lets her purse fall from her shoulder. It lands in the crook of her elbow and she readjusts the antlers on her head, "You live *here*?" El blinks, stunned. "I didn't-" she stops herself, head shaking in disbelief, "I had no idea."

"Yeah, me neither," Mike husks as his eyes nearly bulge out of his head at the sight of her bending down to place her bag on the floor.

(She had been heading up the stairs before Mike opened the door. What if he *hadn't*? What if-)

"How was your Christmas?"

"Mediocre," he shrugs, suddenly feeling overdressed in his white shirt and slacks. He watches as she slips out of her heels and wiggles her toes in his doorway, "Drunk?"

El smirks up at him, "You would think," she huffs, "but alas, no. I had one glass of wine and it was watered down because my stepbrother is a total lightweight." She explains, crossing her ankles as she moves to lean against his doorframe. "Have you been here all day?" she gestures towards his clothes, peering over his shoulder to look inside his apartment. She stands up on her tiptoes, sucking in her bottom lip almost nervously, "all dressed- up?"

"I was at my sister's place all day," Mike clarifies, folding his arms over his chest as his jaw clenches, cheekbones popping when a smile graces his face, "Got a little sidetracked with my nephew and his new scooter but..."

"Sounds like you had more fun than I did."

"Right!" Mike clicks his tongue, "The proposal, how was it?"

"Oh, no, that went great!" El says, and she rests the right side of her body against his doorframe, kicking her purse aside, "I just had to deal with the usual "How's life, Jane? How's your *love* life, Jane? How's your *sex* life, Jane?", which..." she sighs, eyes closing momentarily as she breathes through her nostrils, "I had to get out of there. I didn't even get dessert."

"I get that." Mike considers his words for a second, "Hey, umm, do you," he bites his lip, "Do you wanna come in for dessert?"

(Nice going, Wheeler.)

"Not dessert." He shakes his head, hands flapping about in some kind of panic at what he said, "Not like *that*. I just meant because I left with, like, half the yule log and I don't think it'd be *safe* for me to eat it all so..."

"I'm, uh," El pauses, eyebrows furrowing as she considers her words. She runs a hand down the door frame, fingers curling around the

wood. Daring a look up at him through long lashes, almost bashful, she says, "I'm kinda vegan."

(Now vegan-friendly!)

Mike simply moves his hands behind his back then, bouncing back on his heels as his lips draw thin, pulling into a wide smile, "Umm," he starts, left brow quirking in amusement as his socks smooth along the wooden floorboards, "That's... good?"

El giggles, "is it?" and as soon as she raises a hand to do *the thing*, Mike stops her. He lowers her arm back down to her side, taking a step closer. When he's but a couple of inches away, he brings his right hand up to the side of her face, fingers gently sweeping against her temple as he brushes her hair back behind her ear, tucking loose curls back into place.

Fighting the smile that's threatening to spread out across his face, Mike just continues gazing down at her, free hand moving to the doorframe to trap her against it.

El shifts slightly, feeling her spine press into the hard wood. Her eyes shift from his face to his chest, then down to the floor, "Do you have Eggos?"

"Is it corny if I say you're the reason I bought them?"

The young woman shrugs, nibbling her bottom lip as she lets her eyes close. She rests her head back against the door, head tilting to the side once her eyes flicker open, "Not if you admit that they're delicious," she says, sheepish and almost childlike.

"If I say they're delicious, can I kiss you?"

El just blinks, doe-eyed and *expectant* (he's not imagining it, right?), "What if I let you kiss me but you lied about liking them because you just wanted to kiss me?"

"Well... since *all* you eat is Eggos," Mike rasps, leaning down to whisper in her ear, "that must mean you taste like that, too."

"Smooth," she flushes, "but there's no mistletoe," El argues, voice still

sweet and low. She looks up to the top of the doorframe, leading Mike to do the same, "That's a deal breaker." She sighs, audibly and perhaps a *tad* dramatically.

Mike's eyes widen then, half-believing her to be serious. His palms slip from the frame, falling to his sides, "Do I need to go buy some?" He sounds almost devastated, and El tentatively places her hand on his chest.

"No," she says, "but the fact that you *asked* is enough for me." "So that's a yes?"

"To kissing me?"

"To everything."

A smile cracks on her face then, slowly taking over her features. Her ears move up, inciting her short hair to fall in her eyes again, but Mike is *there* to push it back.

He brushes the curls away, fingers threading through her locks as he pushes her back— her back gently colliding with the door this time. El tightens her grip on his shoulders to steady herself when he finally leans down to capture her lips in a kiss.

It's gentle, and sweet, and Mike is just *in love*.

Her arms snake around his neck, hands clasping as she tugs on the short hairs at the base of his skull. He'd styled his hair back earlier in the day, but his curls are free now, and Mike couldn't be happier at the fact—not when she pulls and presses and quite literally *smashes* herself up against him, invading his personal space and making it her own.

El stands up on her toes, thin black tights stretching up her legs as she strives to bring Mike closer, running her tongue along his bottom lip when his hand grips her waist.

And only a second later, she's pulling away, lips brushing against his ear as she whispers perhaps the softest, purest thing he's ever heard in his whole entire life, "And the bells are ringing out, for Christmas Day."